

Confronting Health Misinformation: A Discussion with the Surgeon General on Building a Healthy Information Environment

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Speaker: Vivek Murthy

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CONFRONTING HEALTH MISINFORMATION:
A DISCUSSION WITH THE SURGEON
GENERAL ON BUILDING A HEALTHY
INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

VICE ADMIRAL VIVEK H. MURTHY, MD, MBA
U.S. SURGEON GENERAL

Join the Stanford Internet Observatory for a conversation with **US Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, MD, MBA**, where he will discuss slowing the spread

of health misinformation, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Health misinformation is a major threat to public health because it can cause confusion, sow mistrust, harm people's health, and undermine public health efforts. Although health misinformation is not a recent phenomenon, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated an already growing issue. While information has enabled people to stay safe and informed throughout the pandemic, it has also led to confusion. The rising use of technology platforms, such as social media companies, online retailers, and search engines, can help connect and inform people, but at the same time, many platforms can also drive misinformation to users.

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1 (4:35-10:15)

2 VIVEK MURTHY: But that good instinct can
3 be harmful when what's being shared is health
4 misinformation, information that is false, inaccurate
5 or misleading, according to the best evidence at the
6 time, and it's harmful even if it comes about through
7 an unintentional game of Internet telephone, because
8 today, we share a worldwide network of e-mails, social
9 media, YouTube videos, and online forums, and just one
10 click can boost a falsehood across these networks
11 before we can put on brakes.

12 In fact, misinformation can travel faster
13 and reach more people than the truth. On an analysis
14 of millions of social media posts from 2006 to 2017,
15 found that false news stories were 70 percent more
16 likely to be shared than true stories. This
17 information blitz can leave our head spinning, unsure
18 of what to believe or where to turn for the truth, and
19 it has had real consequences for our health.

20 During the pandemic, we've seen
21 misinformation about masks, COVID-19 treatments, and
22 COVID-19 vaccines. A recent survey found that
23 two-thirds of unvaccinated adults have heard of at
24 least one COVID-19 vaccine myth and either believe
25 it's true or not sure. The sad truth during this

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1 pandemic is misinformation has divided our friends,
2 families, and communities. It's led to threats
3 against our public health workers who try to enforce
4 safety measures, and it's cost us so many lives, but
5 misinformation didn't start with this pandemic. For
6 decades, we've seen persistent rumors about HIV AIDS
7 that have undermined efforts to reduce infection
8 rates. And during the Ebola pandemic, misinformation
9 spread rapidly on social media, confusion, and
10 escalating discord.

11 Now, outside the scope of epidemics or
12 pandemics, health misinformation has caused everyday
13 harm leading people to turn down effective treatments
14 for cancer, heart disease or other illnesses. The
15 bottom line is that health misinformation takes away
16 our power to make the best decisions for our health,
17 and the health of our families. That's why today I'm
18 really seeing my first advisory as a 21st Century U.S.
19 Attorney General declaring that health misinformation
20 is an urgent public health threat that we must
21 confront together.

22 I want to be clear that believing or
23 sharing information doesn't make us ignorant or
24 ill-intentioned. It makes us human. Because we all
25 want to do everything we can to keep ourselves and our

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1 loved ones healthy and safe. So when we read an
2 alarming social media post, and we come across advice
3 on a website that seems helpful, it's natural for us
4 to want to pass it along to others. Or try to stay
5 informed, ask questions, and share concerns. The
6 problem comes when the information is not just wrong,
7 but it's also amplified by three things that's super
8 charge misinformation, fear, polarization, and
9 technology.

10 Let's talk about fear for a moment. It's
11 not hard to understand what's contributed to fear
12 especially during this past year. We've been through
13 a roller coaster of infections surges all over the
14 world. We've experienced a trauma of losing loved
15 ones, sometimes without a chance to say good-bye, and
16 many of us are worried about the toll of this
17 pandemic, not just on our lives, but on our
18 livelihoods. Fear is also sharpened by prior
19 experiences, and many people have had painful
20 experiences of neglect or abuse, but the very systems
21 that are supposed to look out for their health, but no
22 matter the source, when fear dominates, it clouds our
23 ability to sift through information and discern what's
24 accurate. Fear also contributes to polarization, when
25 we become distrustful of those who don't share our

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1 beliefs or life experiences. In such cases, distrust
2 can turn to anger and resentment which can make it
3 difficult for us to hear people who don't share our
4 world view and lead us to discount information even
5 from credible sources. If we're not careful, we can
6 go down a path where we find ourselves look to believe
7 anything that proves the other side is wrong even if
8 that information is false or misleading.

9 Technology also plays a role in this
10 dynamic, exacerbating our polarization and making us
11 more prone to sharing misinformation. Product
12 features such as the like button reward us for sharing
13 content that will prove popular, and
14 emotionally-charged content usually wins out over
15 accurate content. Algorithms also tend to give us
16 more of what we click on, and they pull us deeper and
17 deeper into the world of misinformation exactly when
18 we need to get out of it.

19 With misinformation in nearly every corner
20 of the globe amplified by fear, polarization and
21 technology, it can leave us feeling like we're playing
22 a game of tug-of-war, when we're being pulled in many
23 different directions. If we want to fight health
24 misinformation, we'll need all parts of society to
25 pull together. That's why this surgeon general

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1 advisory has recommendations for everyone. We're
2 asking clinicians to address misinformation with their
3 patients. We're asking educators to strengthen
4 information literacy programs. We're asking
5 researchers to help us learn more about how
6 misinformation spreads. We're also asking journalists
7 and media outlets to address the public's questions
8 without amplifying misinformation. We're asking
9 technology companies to operate with greater
10 transparency and accountability so that misinformation
11 doesn't continue to poison our sharing platforms, and
12 we know the government can play an important role,
13 too. Bringing stakeholders together with urgency
14 around a common vision for a healthy information
15 environment, as well as supporting community
16 organizations that are trying to get accurate
17 information to their community members.

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1 (12:56-13:30)

2 VIVEK MURTHY: Every week when I talk to
3 doctors and nurses around the country, I can hear the
4 exhaustion and burnout in their voices, as they take
5 care of more and more patients with COVID-19 who did
6 not get vaccinated all too often because they were
7 misled by misinformation. This is why it is so
8 important that we confront misinformation as a nation.
9 Each one of us has the power and responsibility to
10 make a difference in this fight. There is no question
11 that lives are depending on it.

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1 (45:42-46:33)

2 TAYLOR AGAJANIAN: Our next question
3 actually comes from myself, do you believe a rapid
4 response initiative like the Virality Project
5 could be implemented at the federal level to combat
6 health misinformation on a national scale from the top
7 down?

8 VIVEK MURTHY: Well, that's a really
9 interesting question, Taylor, and I do think that it
10 could be really interesting to look at the idea in
11 having -- pardon me, having a federal organized effort
12 to combat misinformation the way you're talking about.
13 I -- you know, I think almost of a myth buster's
14 effort to help people bring sort of direct information
15 and encounter things they may be hearing that are
16 false, and while we each do that, myself and others in
17 federal government in many state and local government,
18 I think there's absolutely opportunities to coordinate
19 that and focus that more effectively. So yes, I think
20 that's a really, really interesting idea.

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1 (50:08-51:10)

2 VIVEK MURTHY: Well, my hope is that people
3 will look at this surgeon's general's advisory and
4 recognize that health misinformation is an urgent
5 threat to our health and well-being, but also that we
6 have a moral and civic responsibility to do our part,
7 to address it, and the good news is, there are steps
8 all of us can take to address it as individuals. We
9 can think about what we share and verify sources.
10 Educators and healthcare professionals have a really
11 important role they can play in, you know, training
12 people, in digital health literacy, and helping to
13 share accurate information with individuals. We know
14 technology companies have a really important role.
15 They must step up and play to slow the spread of
16 misinformation on their sites where that's by either
17 sharing data with people and researchers about what
18 interventions they're making and the impact that's
19 having or whether it's by changing their algorithms
20 and making other alterations to their platform to
21 identify misinformation early and slow its spread and
22 avoid sending more information of misinformation to
23 people who are consuming it, so there's steps all of
24 us can take.
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1 (51:43-52:40)

2 RENEÉ DIRESTA: We can strike a balance
3 with amplifying good information, encountering bad
4 information and still protecting freedom of
5 expression, so I want to thank Dr. Murthy for this
6 advisory. I'm for articulating a whole society
7 approach that we can all participate in because as he
8 and our other panelists noted we have the power, so
9 thank you very much for joining us today.

10 VIVEK MURTHY: Well, thank you, Renee, for
11 those kind words. I -- I do want to say thank you to
12 you personally because you have been a leader in this
13 effort long before many people recognize what was
14 happening with COVID misinformation. You were there
15 looking at the data, looking at the numbers, speaking
16 out, raising the flags, saying there's something here
17 we've got to address and do so urgently. I have
18 personally learned a lot from your work and from our
19 conversations together, and so I just want to say
20 thank you to you for everything you've done for being
21 such a great partner for moderating our event today,
22 and just for being a partner in the future, because I
23 know we have lots and lots more that we've got to do
24 together.
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1 (53:14-53:54)

2 VIVEK MURTHY: Health misinformation is not
3 one of those challenges. There are steps we can take
4 every day in our lives, not just by deciding what we
5 choose to share or not share, but also by speaking up
6 on these issues by holding to account whether it's
7 technology companies or other players who may be
8 allowing misinformation to spread or who, in some
9 cases, may be willfully spreading misinformation. I'm
10 optimistic that we can make progress in this area and
11 myself, my team, we're committed to working with you,
12 Renee, with others, you know, who we've been, you
13 know, partnered with over the last many months, and to
14 all those who are joining today to ensure that we
15 build a healthier information environment in our
16 country that supports the health and well-being of
17 everyone.

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Melissa J. Lane, CCR, CSR, RPR